

Article

Swinging City: A Cultural Geography of London 1950-1974, Simon Rycroft. Ashgate: Farnham, England, 2011, 189 pages, ISBN: 978-0-7546-4830-7. £50.00 (hardback). [Book Review]

Neate, Hannah

Available at <http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/4481/>

Neate, Hannah ORCID: 0000-0002-0131-1578 (2011) Swinging City: A Cultural Geography of London 1950-1974, Simon Rycroft. Ashgate: Farnham, England, 2011, 189 pages, ISBN: 978-0-7546-4830-7. £50.00 (hardback). [Book Review]. Urban Geography Research Group Book Review Series .

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.

For more information about UCLan's research in this area go to <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/researchgroups/> and search for <name of research Group>.

For information about Research generally at UCLan please go to <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/>

All outputs in CLoK are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including Copyright law. Copyright, IPR and Moral Rights for the works on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [policies](#) page.

Swinging City: A Cultural Geography of London 1950-1974, Simon Rycroft. Ashgate: Farnham, England, 2011, 189 pages, ISBN: 978-0-7546-4830-7. £50.00 (hardback).

Swinging City - which makes an appropriate addition to the Ashgate *Re-Materialising Cultural Geography* series - is a culmination of Simon Rycroft's long-standing interest in exploring and conceptualising the cultural geographies of the 1960s. The monograph draws on both re-worked journal articles and new material to set out a persuasive agenda for re-imagining how cultural and historical geographers might differently understand the material changes that occurred during the period 1950-1974 as part of what the author terms a burgeoning 'cosmic nature.'

At the core of this book lies an assertion that 'During the 1960s this new conception of a multi-dimensional, infinitely complex cosmic nature resulted in a range of practices that eschewed traditional forms of representation and attempted to develop more intuitive, embodied and multi-sensory modes of expression, such as in the multi-media lightshow, developments in underground cinema aesthetics, performance art, painting and experiments with the written word on the pages of certain underground publications' (pages 15-16). This focus on a multi-sensory shift in the register of representation is what distinguishes Rycroft's work from other writings on London in the 1960s and also locates it firmly within on-going debates relating to the theory and practice of cultural geography. It does this by contributing to discussions relating to the importance of 'ideas and vision (not just the visual)' and what is often positioned as a dichotomy between 'new' cultural geography and non-representational theory – a distinction that Rycroft sees as too easily drawn (page 12).

In common with many cultural historians and other writers on the period Rycroft adopts what sixties scholar Arthur Marwick (1998) terms a 'long-sixties' approach. This acknowledges that although the core arguments of the

book are concerned with London in the 1960s it is necessary to look beyond this period to understand the contrasting and sometimes overlapping geographical imaginations that worked to position the city as a key centre in the global post-war and post-imperial landscape. The period 1950-1974 is chosen to allow discussion of 'the development of planning, architectural, literary and artistic aesthetics' and their role in shaping the morphology of Rycroft's 'swinging city.' 1974 is the nominal end point chosen as a date when the countercultural publications, which provide the material for most of the discussions in the latter half of the book, ceased to be published. This highlights the author's distinctive approach which draws exclusively on print media - albeit often obscure and ephemeral - rather than incorporating oral testimony (a strategy often used by scholars of the near recent past).

Swinging City is structured into two parts: the first deals with 'the origins of the swinging imagination of the city'; the second 'the emergence and character of the counterculture in London' (page 18). Although Rycroft shies away from making strong distinctions between these two halves of the book, for me, there are clear differences between chapters two to four and five to eight. The first half of the book introduces the emergence of a post-Newtonian/Einstein influenced world-view in the post-war period and evidences expressions of this new geographical sensibility by a range of actors. These include a heady mix of planners and architects (epitomised by the 1951 Festival of Britain); the Beats in the United States; Angry Young Men in the British provinces; and Pop and Op artists (most notably the Independent Group and Bridget Riley).

However, it is in chapter 4 that the 'swinging city' takes on its most tangible form. This is where a 1966 edition of *Time* magazine is discussed at length to set out how the most recognisable and easily caricatured Swinging London came about via the influence of a particular American publication (think here of Carnaby Street, pop star idolatry and frivolous consumer culture). It's worth noting that this 1966 edition of *Time* is an often used reference point for writing on sixties London, yet Rycroft manages to enliven his discussion by

placing it within broader discourses relating to architecture, fashion and cinematic visions of London as a modern and modish city. The effect of this chapter is to set 1966 as something of a watershed; a turning point before the onset of underground/ countercultural London from 1967 onwards.

Whilst the first half of the book is impressive in its coverage of a series of different 'visions' of a modern and swinging city, I found the second half a more satisfying read as it is more obviously focused on a shorter time period (1967-1974) and draws on a more clearly defined set of materials, namely the underground press. What chapters five to eight effectively do is use selected examples of London's underground publications to map the city's counterculture via a range of representations and practices: poetry readings, light shows, political protest and other forms of resisting 'establishment' influences. It is within the often colourful, and sometimes illegible, pages of the *International Times* and *Oz* magazines that the full extent of Rycroft's arguments relating to fundamental shifts in modes of viewing and understanding the world are most evident.

Rather than reinforcing stereotypical hippy/peace and love tropes what is put forward is a complex cultural politics positioned as drawing heavily on technoscientific discourse as espoused by the likes of Theodore Rozak, R.D. Laing, Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan. This manifested itself not only in the pages of the underground publications that Rycroft discusses but also in experiments with psychedelic drugs, cinema, environments and happenings. 'The message in these activities was that the self was fundamentally and inescapably networked, not only to other subjects in the world, but to the objects of nature and technology within and beyond the world' (page 153). Herein lies a setback in this second half of the book: whilst a lot of time is spent explaining how this cosmic nature linked subjects to a global consciousness, London is often lost amongst these experimental practices and forms of representation.

Another slight disappointment rests on the brevity of the concluding chapter. Whilst it effectively draws out main points and arguments forwarded in the previous chapters I also had a certain expectation that the book would be drawn to a close with more of a programmatic approach to further work on sixties geographies. This is a period that has been largely overlooked amongst other cultural and historical geographical work on the twentieth century so Rycroft's monograph makes an important contribution towards opening up, revising and (to use the author's words) 're-visioning' work on urban cultures and the twentieth century, although it ends rather modestly without actually spelling this out. Even so, *Swinging City* is an invaluable starting point for further explorations into the 'long' 1960s and its many geographical imaginations.

References

Marwick, A. (1998). *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Dr Hannah Neate

Institute of Geography, University of Edinburgh